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AUTHOR Klinger-Vartabedian, Laurel; O'Flaherty, Kathleen
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent to which perceived teacher status differentials influenced students' perceptions of teacher self-disclosure. This study involved a two-step procedure. Initially 30 students in a basic speech section were asked to recall examples of teacher self-disclosure that had occurred in classes in which they were enrolled. Then 13 statements were selected representing a wide range of disclosure from low to high. Next, subjects, 263 female and 243 male undergraduates enrolled in a basic oral communication program, were randomly assigned to hear one of eight audiotape-recordings of a portion of a lecture. Speakers on each tape were either male or female and were identified either as professors or graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). The tapes contained identical material, except that four "moderately high disclosure" tapes illustrated examples with personal anecdotes. Students were then asked to complete a questionnaire concerning the appropriateness and interest of the illustrations. Results indicated that (1) students felt it was slightly more appropriate for professors to use stories than GTAs; (2) there was a slight tendency for professors to seem more likeable than GTAs, but that in a the low self-disclosure setting for females, the GTA was rated slightly more likeable than the professor; (3) in the high self-disclosure setting for females, the GTA was regarded as revealing more than the professor; and (4) students felt it was more appropriate for the male professor to disclose than for the male GTA to disclose. The results suggest that a moderate level of self-disclosure serves as an act of equalization, but as status differentials decrease, disclosures may have a neutral or negative effect. (One table, a copy of the questionnaire, footnotes, and 29 references are included.) (JC)

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Student Perceptions of Self-Disclosure in the Classroom Based on Perceived Status Differentials*

By

Laurel Klinger-Vartabedian Kathleen O'Flaherty

The Wichita State University

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(316) 689-3185

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent to which perceived status differentials influence students' perceptions of instructor self-disclosure. Students in basic speech communication courses listened to randomly divided audio presentations which were either male or female speakers engaged in high or low disclosure. The speaker was identified as a graduate teaching assistant or a professor.

The findings reinforced the notion that there is a relationship between status and self-disclosure, although the unique dynamics of the classroom seem to complicate that relationship. It is also suggested that there is an unexplored relationship between speaker status and level of self-disclosure which determines the perception of appropriateness. Discovery of this interrelationship or optimum balance requires further investigation.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE CLASSROOM BASED ON PERCEIVED STATUS DIFFERENTIALS

Introduction

Effective communication in the classroom is paramount. As Richmond and McCroskey (1984, 125) proclaimed "communication is the central element in teaching." While few would question such a fundamental relationship, this insight deserves further explication since communication is such a complex phenomena. Through examination and understanding of the impact of specific behaviors and variables in the classroom, instructors may gain practical knowledge to enhance the educational process. In this study the ramifications of self-disclosure by instructors in the college classroom are examined. More specifically, the study investigates whether perceived status differentials influence students' perceptions of an instructor.

Literature Review

The relationship of self-disclosure to learning outcomes has not been extensively investigated. Nussbaum and Scott (1979) found self-disclosure to be positively associated with student affective and behavioral learning but negatively associated with cognitive learning. McCarthy and Schmeck (1981) reported that self-disclosing statements by a male professor resulted in higher recall for males and lower recall for females, thus suggesting an improved cognitive functioning for the male subjects. Additionally, self-reference has been isolated as an important factor in information processing which can result in superior retention and recall (Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker, 1977; Danish, D'Augelli, and Hauer, 1980).

Although little instructional communication literature has examined the impact of self-disclosure on the classroom environment, it has been determined that self-disclosure positively influences students' evaluations of teacher performance (Scott & Nussbaum, 1981). In many studies self-disclosure is not specifically identified as a construct but it is reasonable to believe that findings on communicator style (Norton, 1983) and source credibility (Scott and Wheeless, 1977) are related to dimensions of self-disclosure. Since self-disclosure is often viewed as the cornerstone for promoting solidarity in relationships it follows that academic achievement produced in a warm, democratic, and convivial environment (Coatney, 1985), and affective and behavioral learning enhanced by teacher immediacy (Anderson, 1979), may to some extent incorporate self-disclosing behaviors.

Of interest to the present study which combines status issues with self-disclosure, Richmond and McCroskey (1984) found referent and expert power to be related positively to learning. McCroskey and Richmond (1983, p. 177) had previously noted that "the foundation of referent power is the student's identification with the teacher... Specifically, it is based on the desire of the less powerful person (the student) to identify with and please the more powerful person (teacher)." Self-disclosure, at appropriate levels, might reasonably be assumed to facilitate student identification with the teacher. Additionally, self-disclosing statements might be particularly rewarding to students as the perceived power or status differential increases if one assumes that the desire for identification increases concomitantly.

As previous research has consistently shown, the perceived status of participants exerts influence in any communication transaction. Andrews and Baird (1986) defined status as the value, importance, or prestige associated with a given role or position. The status one communicant identifies his/her communication partner to be in determines the pattern of interaction that will take place between them. Higher status usually confers additional perceived power on the role occupant. For example, a person who is perceived as having higher status in a conversational exchange has more power to control or influence the content and length of the interaction than does the person with lower status (Derber, 1979).

Status differentials vary but undeniably influence interactions in the classroom setting. Salomon (1981) argued that status differences in our educational system prevent students and teachers from achieving more "repleteness." He identified self-disclosure and feedback as two mechanisms which enable students and teachers to attain more interdependence. Tjosvold (1978) and Kipnis (1976) both found that lower status persons are more sensitive to the relational aspects of messages than are superiors. Lower status persons wish to reduce perceived power differentials while higher status persons are less sensitive to relational cues and messages. Through self-disclosure the two parties are moved toward parity.

This last generalization suggests that self-disclosure is a desirable tool for establishing and maintaining relationships. Bassett and Smythe (1979) noted the positive aspects of self-disclosure in the classroom: reciprocation, trust building, and investment in the student/teacher relationship. However, certain

levels and types of disclosure are deemed more appropriate than others and therefore seem to facilitate interpersonal attraction. Bassett and Smythe (1979) cautioned that the appropriateness of the disclosure to the setting was the pivotal issue. Research has isolated variables such as gender (Kleinke and Kahn, 1980; Derlega and Chaikin, 1976), timing (Archer and Burleson, 1980), and the number of interactants as important influences on the perception of appropriateness. This study is predicated on the supposition that, in addition to these variables, the determination of appropriateness is linked to student perceptions of and expectations for an instructor's status.

Research on gender differences in terms of self disclosure has produced inconsistent findings. Many studies have demonstrated that women self-disclose more than men. However, other studies have concluded that there are no discernable differences, while a few have shown that men disclose more than women (Pearson, 1985). Archer and Berg (1978) noted that while reciprocity in self-disclosure was the norm for both males and females in experimental situations requiring low to moderate self-disclosure, males did not reciprocate in high-disclosure settings. This lack of reciprocation could be due to discomfort with the situation, lack of awareness of the escalating demands, or a sense that a higher status precludes the need to respond in kind. This latter assumption has received support in the literature although numerous factors along with gender interact in any given communication transaction.

The relationship between gender and status has come under much scrutiny in the past two decades. Of particular importance to the present study was Henley's (1977) assertion that sex differences in

human communication are most readily explained as status differences. Of additional interest, Cline and Musolf (1985) formulated their self-disclosure study, in part, on the assumption that both males and females value male partners over female partners in a setting requiring disclosure. Therefore, when studying status it seems incumbent upon the researcher to account for gender.

While experts disagree about gender-related issues, there is consensus that the dyadic communication setting is most conducive to self-disclosing behavior. The discloser is best able to gauge the reaction of the receiver in this setting and alter messages accordingly. Not suprisingly, the preponderance of work in this area has examined self-disclosure within an interpersonal framework.

Outside of this framework there is much conjecture but there are few experimental efforts which explore the dynamics of self-disclosure in a public speaking setting. Burger and Vartabedian (1985) assessed the role that status and self-disclosure played in speaker persuasiveness. They found that high self-disclosure decreased the effectiveness of a high status speaker while it increased the effectiveness of a low status speaker.

Experimentation in the classroom setting is both intriguing and complex because it contains dyadic, group, and public settings. Classroom relationships between teachers and students are ongoing across a designated period of time. Students will develop first-impressions of an instructor but may alter these impressions as the semester or year progresses. The hierarchical relationship between students and the teacher has been the object of some inquiry. In communication literature, status and power are used in close

conjunction and often one term is seen as an antecedent of the other. Two studies (McCroskey and Richmond, 1983, and Richmond and McCroskey, 1984) which examined the use of power in the classroom focused on power as communicative influence. They were concerned with the strategic use of power based on the classiification system devised by French and Raven (1968). For the purposes of this study it is useful to distinguish between power as a strategy and power or status as a product of social relationships. This study exphasizes the second interpretation.

Class size influences how much interaction takes place between the student and an instructor and also determines the nature of that interaction. A larger class typically necessitates a more structured or formal setting. Correspondently, the appropriateness of self-disclosure is subject to the same constraints which occur in other situations (i.e., timing, number of interactants, gender and status) but is additionally effected by the unique attributes of the classroom setting.

When looking specifically at the college classroom, teacher status is a topic of interest given the substantial use of graduate 1 teaching assistants in lower division courses. In a survey of undergraduate attitudes toward graduate teaching assistants, Stayrook and Majer (1973) found that students generally reacted positively to teaching assistants in comparison to full-time faculty. Students found teaching assistants easier to respond to in class and more approachable both in and outside class.

As this review of literature evidences, much has been written which looks at self-disclosure, status, and variables that influence

the dynamics of the classroom setting. No one, however, has systematically and comparatively examined students' perceptions of the differing statuses that an instructor can carry into the college classroom (i.e., graduate teaching assistant, professor) and the subsequent impact of self-disclosing behavior on that perceived status. This represents a clear void in available literature and deserves investigation. Findings in this area would be beneficial for universities which increasingly use GTAs to instruct lower division courses and for the training of teachers in general.

METHODS

Hypotheses

It is predicted that in the moderately high disclosure condition, teachers with lower status (i.e., teaching assistant) will be perceived more negatively because disclosure will not be viewed as an overture to reduce status differentials. In the low disclosure condition, it is predicted that there will be little differentiation in attributional characteristics based on status of the presenter. Low disclosure precluded both offers of equity from those of higher status and demands for reciprocity from those of lower status.

Pretest

In order to methodologically enact this study, a two-step procedure was carried out. Initially 30 students in a basic speech section were asked to recall examples of teacher self-disclosure that had occurred in classes in which they were enrolled. From these examples 13 statements were selected which seemed to represent a wide range of disclosure from low to high. Additionally, three

paired statements which contained the same disclosure but were attributed to personal or non-personal sources were also included. In order to include the matched pairs, it was necessary to administer two separate forms of the questionnaire. These questionnaires were then distributed to 89 students in four sections of a basic oral communication course. Students were asked to rate each statement from "extremely personal" disclosure to "not personal at all" on a 7 point Likert-like scale. The lower the score, the more personal the perception of the disclosure.

For this particular study, the 3 paired statements presented in Table 1 were of importance. Analysis of the responses to these items, 46 responses to one form and 43 to the other, indicated that for each pair there was a highly significant difference between the means of the self-referenced and other-referenced statements. Table 1 indicates the means for each statement, the t-value for each pair and its corresponding degrees of freedom and level of significance. Moderately high disclosure was desirable since extremely high disclosure might be considered somewhat more aberrant in the classroom.

Step two in the process involved 506 undergraduates, 263 females and 243 males, enrolled in a basic oral communication program. They were told that they were participating in a study concerned with interpersonal perception, specifically focusing on the way speakers are perceived in the classroom setting. Students were then asked to listen to a brief audio-taped presentation on longevity theory. While actual presentations or videotape might provide a closer facsimile to the classroom experience, these approaches would introduce variables

such as attractiveness between the male and female speaker, speaker-audience rapport, and the visual impact of speaking styles. Consequently, the decision was made to use a highly controlled treatment with the recognition that "all such decisions involve trade-offs between control and verisimiltude" (Wolfson and Pearce, 1983, p. 252). The introduction read to the students before the tape began presented one of eight test conditions. The eight scenarios presented all possible combinations of the dichtomous independent variables under examination: gender of the speaker, status of the speaker, and level of disclosure. The presenter was identified as either Jane or John Walker who was further described as being either a graduate teaching assistant or a professor in the Gerontology Department of a nearby university. The tapes the students heard contained identical content material with the exception that tapes designated "moderately high disclosure" illustrated examples at three distinct points with events from the speaker's past or with examples based on members of the speaker's immediate family. These examples were the moderately-high self disclosure item from each matched pair pretested earlier. In the low disclosure tape the same stories were attributed to media accounts. Different course sections were randomly selected to hear one of the eight audio tapes. The "N" in parentheses indicates the number of respondents who heard each tape: male professor, low disclosure (N=82); male professor, moderately high disclosure (N=61); female professor, low disclosure (N=24); female professor, moderately high disclosure (N=48); male GTA, low disclosure (N=94); male GTA, moderately high disclosure (N=60); female GTA, low disclosure (N=66); female GTA, moderately high disclosure (N=71).

After listening to the tape, students were asked to complete a brief 17 item questionnaire (see Addendum A). Included on the instrument were six demographic questions and three content recall questions. One question regarding the interest level of the content and seven questions dealing with presenter attributes which influence affective learning were of direct interest to the present study. Those questions were designed to tap perceptions of disclosure (amount revealed, appropriate for position, appropriate stories) and perceptions of presenter (knowledgeable, likeable, capable, deserving of respect). Students were asked to respond to these eight questions on a Likert-like scale with a continuum ranging from one to seven.

FINDINGS

Demographically, selecting only students who claimed U.S. citizenry, an almost perfect split was achieved on the variable gender (52.3% females, 47.7% males). The respondents were predominantly freshmen or sophomores (83.3%) although they tended to be slightly older than the national average for these classes. Seventy percent claimed that they were full-time students and 76.8% were employed at the time of the study. Initial frequency runs on the questionnaire items demonstrated that none of the distributions were significantly skewed.

In order to examine the effect of status, gender of the presenter and disclosure level on students' responses to the perception questions, crosstabular tables and measures of association were generated. Lambda was the measure of association interpreted given

the nominal-level nature of the independent variable status. Chi-square was the chosen test of significance.

Crosstabular analysis began with the examination of the relationship between status and each of the perception variables while controlling for level of disclosure. Negligible relationships appeared in the moderately-high disclosure partials between status and the amount revealed, .03 and between status and the appropriateness of the presenter using stories to illustrate the theories of longevity, .03. Professors were seen as revealing slightly less. It was also viewed as slightly more appropriate for professors to use stories as illustrations given percentage difference within the table.

Under the condition low-disclosure, there was a negligible association, .05 between status and the extent to which students found the presenter to be a likeable person. Percentage differences indicated the tendency for professors to be perceived as more likeable than GTAs. This is contrary to Stayrook and Majer's finding.

Given this finding and the negligible relationships in the moderately-high disclosure partial, elaboration analysis was extended to determine if relationships existed between status and the perception variables while controlling for level of disclosure and gender of the speaker. The original status-likeable relationship under the low disclosure condition was specified. The relationship increased to .15 and was significant at the .05 level for females but disappeared for males. In the female partial, the GTA was rated more likeable than the professor.

Shifting focus to the moderately-high disclosure settings, a weak association, .08, between status and the amount of information

revealed appeared when the speaker was female. Percentage differences within the table indicate that although the two tapes contained identical information, the female GTA was seen as revealing more personal information than the female professor. This relationship was negligible when the speaker was male.

Under the condition, moderately-high disclosure-male speaker, a significant weak relationship, .09, (p(.05) was present between status and the appropriateness of using personal illustrations given the presenter's status. Percentage differences indicate that it was seen as more appropriate for the male professor rather than the male GTA to disclose.

The next logical step in the analysis would be to control for level of disclosure, gender of the speaker, and gender of the student but the small number of respondents who heard specific tapes prohibited analysis using a third controlling variable. Crosstabular tables were generated, however, which examined the relationship between status and the perception variables while controlling for level of disclosure and gender of the student. A weak relationship, .05, level was found between status and the amount revealed under the condition moderately-high disclosure, male student. The GTA was seen as having revealed more personal information than the professor even though the tape contents were identical. Under the low disclosure setting, for both male and female students, a negligible relationship (.05 for females; .04 for males) was found between status and likeableness of the presenter. Female students viewed the GTA as more likeable while males rated the professor as slightly more likeable.

DISCUSSION

The statistical relationships which did appear suggest certain trends which deserve further extrapolation. Disclosure of personal examples from professors, when compared to graduate teaching assistants, was viewed as more appropriate. Higher status seemed to allow for more latitude in self-disclosing behavior.

When self-disclosure is initiated by a person of higher status it may be viewed as a "gift" which is offered to reduce power differentials. Consequently, a moderate or appropriate level of self-disclosure will be seen as an act of equalization. Lower status persons would value and appreciate such a gift and would find the bearer attractive. As status differentials decrease (i.e., professor/student -vs- GTA/student) students have less need for equalization of status and therefore disclosure may have a neutral or even somewhat negative effect. Students may be more aware of a graduate teaching assistant's disclosing behavior because it does not have the unconscious value of "gift-giving." Since the GTA's status is more equivalent to the student's, instances of disclosure may be viewed as a demand for reciprocity among equals. This in turn may result in discomfort since students may view the classroom as a public speaking setting which is not conducive to self-disclosure. Additionally, graduate teaching assistants, particularly females, may be seen as needing to "distance" themselves from students and therefore disclosing behavior sacrifices their status.

Male students thought that male graduate teaching assistants revealed more than male professors while all students felt that the female graduate teaching assistant revealed more than the female

professor. This seems to be linked to awareness of behavior. Drawing from the preceding analysis, it is evident that the students are less aware of the professors' disclosure than they are of the graduate teaching assistants' disclosure. It follows that they are more attuned to the GTA's behavior and self-disclosure is deemed more inappropriate because it registers at a more conscious level.

Based on previous research findings, it would appear that there is an optimum balance between status and appropriate disclosure. The relationship between status and self-disclosure, noted by Burger and Vartabedian (1985), was counter to our finding, but varying degrees of either disclosure or status may explain this discrepancy. If we were to increase the intimacy of the disclosure in this study, it is possible that we would replicate their finding. Also, there is more expectation for disclosure in the classroom than in a more structured public speaking setting so differing conditions may preclude consistent findings.

This investigation reinforces the notion that there is a relationship between status and self-disclosure but also reveals that the relationship responds unexpectedly to differential degrees of both status and disclosure. Persons in any environment which has a strong sense of hierarchy could benefit from a better understanding of the dynamics of status and self-disclosure. These preliminary findings provide insight into the relationship between status and disclosure and its influence on a receiver's perceptions. This area of study holds promise for further research.

Table 1

Self-Referenced vs. Other-Referenced Statements

	$\bar{X}$	Statements
1.	(4.8)	Last week on a radio talk show about single parenting, one parent was discussing how dealing with sick children, getting kids ready to go to the sitters, and so on can really wear you down.
1a.	(2.3)	Since I'm a single parent raising two children on my own I know what it is like dealing with the chicken pox, bathing, dressing, and delivering kids to the sitters. I think people who say it wears you down may be right.
		t=7.723, df=87, p<.0001
2.	(4.1)	An advice column recently had an article about someone who had taken her fiance home to meet the family. Her grandfather, who was from the old country said I should get to know my fiance better. He said, "you wouldn't buy a horse without checking into its breeding, just remember that."
2a.	(2.5)	Right after I was engaged I took my fiance home to meet my family. My grandfather, who was from the old country said I should get to know my fiance better. He said, "you wouldn't buy a horse without checking into its breeding, just remember that."
		t=4.2261, df=87, p.<.0005
3.	(3.8)	A recent journal article had a case study about two brothers, one who was married and one who wasn't. The unmarried one lived life a day at a time. The author noted that the single brother ate out all of the time and probably "drank" a few of his meals too.
3a.	(1.7)	I have two brothers, one who is married and one who isn't. My brother who isn't married lives life a day at a time. He eats out all of the time and probably "drinks" a few of his meals too.
		t=6.0379, df=87, p<.0001

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please indicate the most appropriate response for each of the following questions by darkening the circle on your computer sheet corresponding to the scale position or response category which reflects your answer.

1. How interesting was the content of this lecture?

   Not Very Interesting 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Interesting

2. To what extent do you believe the presenter is knowledgeable about this topic?

   Not Very Knowledgeable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Knowledgeable

3. The most important factor in determining longevity is:
   1. psychological makeup.
   2. geographic location.
   3. maintenance of a strong social network.
   4. heredity.

4. To what extent do you believe the speaker revealed personal information during the presentation?

   Not Very Much 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Much

5. To what extent do believe the presenter is a likeable person?

   Not Very Likeable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Likeable

6. Findings on the relationship between longevity and the number of children you have:
   1. showed no relationship between number of children and longevity.
   2. revealed contradictory findings.
   3. proved that someone with ten children will outlive someone with two.
   4. accounted for the fact that women live longer than men.

7. To what extent do you believe the illustrations used to explain the theories of longevity were appropriate for a person in the presenter's position?

   Not Very Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Appropriate

8. To what extent do you believe the presenter is a capable person?

   Not Very Capable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Capable

9. Statistics show that single people (when compared to married persons) will:
   1. live longer due to a more carefree existence.
   2. live longer because of more emphasis on physical fitness and nutritious foods.

3. not live as long because of certain physical and social factors.
4. have approximately the same life span.

10. To what extent do you believe the presenter is deserving of repspect and authority?

Not Very Deserving 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Deserving

11. Was it appropriate for the presenter to tell stories to illustrate the theories of longevity?

Not Very Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Appropriate

Please indicate which of the following apply to you by darkening the circle corresponding to the appropriate response.

12. Gender
    1. Female
    2. Male

13. Age
    1. 21 or under
    2. 22-25
    3. 26-35
    4. 36-45
    5. 46-55
    6. 56 or more

14. Citizenship
    1. United States citizen
    2. Not United States citizen

15. Student Classification
    1. Freshman
    2. Sophomore
    3. Junior
    4. Senior
    5. Continuing Education
    6. Guest Student

16. Current Educational Status
    1. Currently enrolled in college full-time
    2. Currently enrolled in college part-time
    3. Currently enrolled in high school
    4. Other (please specify): _____)

17. Current Employment Status
    1. Working full-time (40 hours or more)
    2. Working part-time (1-39 hours)
    3. Unemployed, laid off, looking for work
    4. Retired
    5. Homemaker
    6. Other (please specify: _____)

FOOTNOTES

1 Gibson, et al. (1985) in a mail-out survey of the basic speech course at universities across the United States found that graduate teaching assistants taught approximately eighteen percent of all basic speech courses while persons of instructor status accounted for an additional thiry percent. These percentages may underestimate the actual number of students receiving instruction from graduate teaching assistants since a percentage may not reflect the fact that at large universities numerous sections may be taught by GTAs while at smaller schools faculty members may teach exclusively.

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